

Both a long-term monitoring program and a pilot study on increasing survivorship of hatchling marine iguanas by reducing cat numbers may help maintain the teeming abundance of marine iguanas throughout the Galápagos Archipelago.

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THE STORY OF THE DISCOVERY OF THE TORTOISE “LONESOME GEORGE” ON PINTA ISLAND

By: Dr. Manuel Cruz P. (Translated by Heidi M. Snell)

THE BEGINNING

In the beginning of 1972, during the last year of our studies in the Department of Natural Sciences of the University of Guayaquil, Hipolito Ronquillo and myself were asked to become the first scholarship students to represent INP and the University at the Darwin Station. This began a long term agreement between the Instituto Nacional de Pesca (INP), the Department of Natural Sciences of the University of Guayaquil and the Charles Darwin Research Station.

GUAYAQUIL TO GALÁPAGOS

In 1972, TAME made twice weekly flights between Guayaquil and Galápagos. Hipolito told me that this was the first time he would be away from his family for so long. We were scheduled to be in Galápagos for three months. After the three hour flight we arrived at Baltra and then to the dock. We went aboard a small boat and traveled four hours around Santa Cruz until we arrived at Puerto Ayora where we were met by the director of the Darwin Station, Dr. Peter Kramer.

I joined the "Introduced Animals" program and my counselor was Dr. Ole Hamann, who taught me to recognize many of the plants of Galápagos. The main part of my project was to learn which plants were being eaten by the goats who were destroying the native vegetation. Another part was to learn about the pigs which were eating the eggs in the nests of the tortoises, both introduced animals endangering the insular ecosystems.

Since I needed to examine the stomach contents of the goats and pigs to identify the species of plants these animals preferred, I worked closely with wardens from the Parque Nacional Galápagos. With them I visited the 'Caseta' (part of the reserve in the highland area of Santa Cruz), the pampas of Santiago, and also the islands of Pinta, Marchena, Genovesa and Santa Fe.

We made a trip to hunt goats in April 1972. The following persons were on the trip: Camilo Calapucha, Pedro Cartagena, Francisco Castañada, Carlos Cedeño, Oswaldo Chapi, Cesar Doaz, Fausto Llere-

na, Basilio Toro, Galo Torres, Luis Torres, Arnaldo Tupiza, and myself. The purpose of the trip was to hunt goats and my study was to look at stomach contents and learn the species of plants which were most likely to disappear under the influence of the goats.

When we were on Pinta I remember one of the Park wardens telling me there had been feces of a tortoise found the year before but no one had seen a live tortoise in many years. [Editor's note: A report was filed at the station and park by Joseph Vagvolgyi who was on Pinta studying snails in November of 1971, he reported finding a tortoise but was unaware of its significance.]

THE DISCOVERY

In order to do the stomach content analysis in the field I carried many items such as a rifle, knife, canteen, plant press, scales, altimeter, and books. I was assigned a Park warden, Francisco Castañada, to help me complete the work.

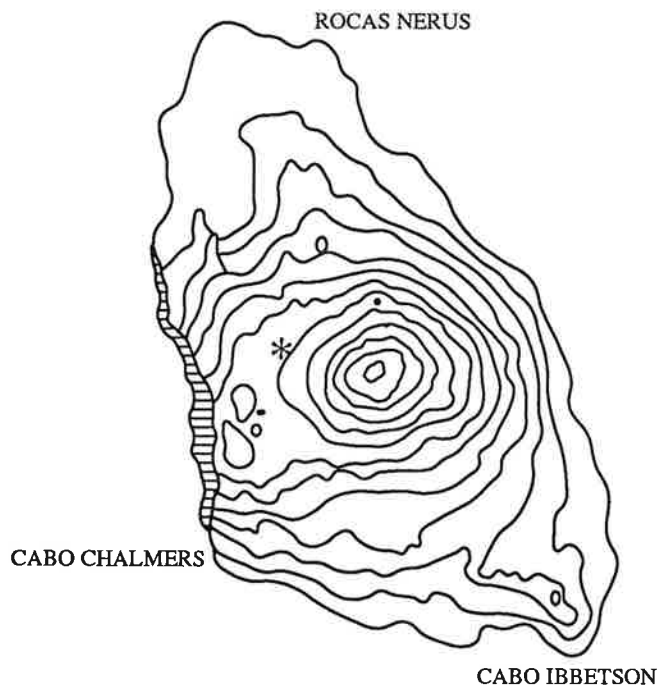


Figure 1. Location on Pinta Island where the Galápagos tortoise *Geochelone elephantopus abingdoni*, "Lonesome George", was found in March 1972.



Figure 2. First photograph of "Lonesome George", taken with Manuel Cruz at the moment of capture on Pinta Island, March 1972.

One day we were at about 300 meters altitude and we observed something moving about 60 to 70 meters distant (Fig. 1). We both thought it was a goat and taking aim with our rifles we walked closer until we saw that it was actually a tortoise! The tortoise was under a palo santo tree (*Bursera graveolens*) and surrounded by large rocks which appeared to enclose the area. I asked Francisco if he would photograph me with the camera I had (Fig. 2).

In order to relocate the area, I took off my shirt and left it hanging like a flag, then I asked Francisco if he would stay with the tortoise while I went back to camp with news of the discovery. At first no one in camp believed me so Camilo returned to the tortoise with me to verify the discovery. When we returned to camp he confirmed the existence of the tortoise.

THE RESCUE

A group of us returned to the tortoise equipped with machetes, ropes and a camera. Before moving

the tortoise Oswaldo Chapi took a few photos. The wardens proceeded to cut several branches, and tied the tortoise to these so we could carry it down to shore suspended. On two occasions the branch holding the tortoise broke and in general the swinging of the tortoise made it very difficult for us to walk over the lava while carrying the tortoise. On many occasions we had to carry it between four people, two in front and two in back; it was a horrible trip! [Editors note: A boat chartered by Ole Hamann and Peter Pritchard arrived on Pinta the following day to leave their group for five days, and take the Park personnel to work on Marchena. Peter and Ole both photographed the tortoise before it was loaded on the boat. It seems certain this boat then took the tortoise back to the Darwin Station. Peter and an assistant walked to the highlands one of the days, but were unable to find anything except bones of a male tortoise and the intact carapace of what Peter believes to have been a mature female. The female had been killed by a machete some few years earlier he estimated. Peter collected

this specimen and took photos (personnel communication, Hamann; Pritchard 1977 & 1984).]

Almost no one is certain who named "Lonesome George" and for what reason. I questioned Julio Cesar Sanmiguel (who is one of the oldest employees of the National Park) and he couldn't remember who named the tortoise. It is almost certain that the name "Lonesome" is because is the only surviving example of a Pinta tortoise. According to Gayle Davis-Merlen, a long-time Station employee, the name "George" came

from the U.S. actor George Goebel who called himself "Lonesome George" in a television program.

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